Death on the Nile

African AIDS takes a turn to the north—as stigma and homophobia erupt in Egypt.

July 1, 2008 By James Wortman

The countries below the Sahara get the bulk of Africa's HIV/AIDS press. But their northern neighbors in sandy, sun-scorched Egypt are now sharing the spotlight. In multiple incidents since fall 2007, at least 12 Cairo men who have sex with men (MSM) have allegedly been beaten, tortured and detained by local police for the Egyptian crime of "debauchery," which the country defines to include any act of homosexual sex. It is punishable by up to three years in prison. The Egyptian police have also forced the men to take HIV tests without obtaining their consent.

The crackdown began in October 2007, when police stopped two quarreling men in Cairo. According to police reports, when one of the men told officials that he was HIV positive, both were taken into custody and reportedly kept chained to hospital beds for 23 hours a day. Arrests continued as officers began tracing the detainees' contacts to prosecute more HIV-positive MSM.

The arrests have been condemned by the United Nations' relief agency UNAIDS and 117 human rights groups around the world. UNICEF ambassador and Egyptian film star Amr Waked declared, "It's insane that this happens in our country!"

As POZ went to print in early June, the Egyptian Health Ministry hadn't taken action. "We suspect that the government—which is in serious economic trouble—is looking for distractions," said Scott Long, director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Program at the U.S. watchdog group Human Rights Watch. "Promoting HIV as 'perversion' might be a convenient way of organizing the distraction."

MSM have long been targeted by Egyptian authorities. From 2001 through 2004, hundreds were allegedly arrested and tortured under the debauchery legislation, which was enacted in 1961 to stifle prostitution.

AIDS advocates argue that the criminalization will affect testing efforts and deter Egypt's HIV-positive population—which is more than 5,000, according to UNAIDS estimates—from seeking antiretroviral treatment.

"There is a great amount of fear and shock," says Soha Abdelaty, deputy director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, in Cairo. "There is a mistaken belief among the officials that this is

how to protect public health—isolate a group that is most at risk so it does not spread the disease to others.” So who, then, will educate them?

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